Construction Codes Advisory

Promoting construction of safe, healthy, habitable buildings

Shipping Containers

Question

Are shipping containers (or "sea cans") subject to building codes and standards?

Answer

Yes – when a shipping container is no longer used for its original purpose.

Shipping containers are manufactured for the shipping and storage of freight. When a shipping container is instead used to support or shelter any use or *occupancy* and placed on a property (whether temporarily or permanently), it is considered a *building*.

As a *building*, shipping containers are required to comply with provisions of *The Construction Codes Act* (the CC Act), *The Building Code Regulations*, *The Energy Code Regulations*, *The Fire Safety Act* and their associated regulations, the National Building Code of Canada (NBC), the National Energy Code of Canada for Buildings, the National Fire Code of Canada (NFC) and all applicable municipal bylaws. Depending on the jurisdiction, the local authority may also require:

- Zoning and development approval
- A building permit
- Construction plans and drawings

Background

Intermodal shipping containers ("sea cans") are designed for the transport of goods and are engineered to be lifted, stacked, handled and moved across multiple transportation systems.

Due to their availability, strength, durability and size, they are increasingly repurposed for other uses. When used in a way that meets the definition of a *building* under the CC Act, a shipping container is subject to a number of requirements applicable to the construction and fire-safe operation of *buildings*.

A *building,* as defined by the CC Act, means any structure used or intended for supporting or sheltering any use or *occupancy*. The definition of a *building* also includes an addition built to an existing structure and, where applicable, the land adjoining a structure.

Compliance with *The Construction Codes Act, The Building Code Regulations, The Energy Code Regulations* and the National Building Code of Canada (NBC) 2020 is addressed in the advisory. Words in italics, other than Act and regulation titles, are defined in the NBC 2020.

Because standard shipping containers are not designed to meet prescriptive building code requirements, additional evaluation is often necessary. Local authorities may require an engineering review and submission of plans certified by a professional engineer prior to issuing a building permit.

Key Considerations

Items that should be addressed and considered prior to construction approval include:

- Use and *occupancy* classification
- Structural condition and inspection
- *Foundation* design
- Anchorage to the *foundation*
- Mechanical systems and ventilation
- *Building* envelope and exterior finish

Dangerous Goods

If the container is intended to store *dangerous goods* as defined and regulated by the NFC, this must be disclosed to the local authority. *Dangerous goods* are defined as products or substances that are regulated under TC SOR/2001-286, "*Transportation of Dangerous Goods Regulations*" or classified as controlled products under HC SOR/2015-17, "*Hazardous Products Regulations*."

All measures necessary to ensure their safe storage must be accommodated in the design, construction, and/or modification of the shipping container for that purpose. This may include:

- Limits on the volume or quantities of *dangerous goods* being stored
- Adequate ventilation
- Fire detection and alarm systems
- Fire suppression systems

Municipal Requirements

As with all development uses, the use of shipping containers as a *building* must comply with zoning bylaws and all other municipal requirements by the local authority. Acceptance of shipping containers may vary by municipality. While some municipalities may permit shipping containers as *buildings*, other municipalities may restrict or regulate their use through zoning controls.

Building and Technical Standards Branch
1430 - 1855 Victoria Avenue
Regina, Saskatchewan S4P 3T2
306-787-4113 Phone
btstandards@gov.sk.ca
www.saskatchewan.ca/btstandards

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This guide is published by the Saskatchewan Ministry of Government Relations for purposes of providing information to users on the topic contained herein. In case of conflict between *The Construction Codes Act* (the CC Act), *The Building Code Regulations* (the BC Regulations), *The Energy Code* Regulations (the EC Regulations), *The Plumbing Code Regulations* (the PC Regulations), the NBC 2020 and this Advisory, provisions of the CC Act, the BC Regulations, the EC Regulations, the PC Regulations and the NBC 2020 apply.